

New Testament Local Church

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Notes taken by a listener during the meetings, MP3 recordings available online¹

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Session 1

James 3:17-18

Wisdom from above is going to be accurate first, but also gentle and peaceable. And therefore it is easy to be entreated, easily taught and corrected.

Is the New Testament a "Pattern"?

Question: Are the teachings of the New Testament on the local church to be regarded as principles to be exercised with spiritual discernment or a pattern to be followed with devoted precision? What is the meaning of the word "pattern"? This gets into the difference between principles and precepts. It gets into what is given to us directly, and what is given just as a detail that we are not expected to follow exactly. The book of the Acts is very relevant to this discussion. It is a historical book. We are given details about what the nation of Israel did, and assume we must follow it exactly. We also find that in the book of the Acts. Some of these things relate to local church practice. Acts 2:41-42 is often taught as a pattern, but then they perform signs and wonders, and sell all things and have all things in common. What authority do we have to take v41-42 and not the rest? In the book of the Acts, they met in homes. Is that part of the pattern? We need a definitive answer on that.

Let's look at the word "pattern."

II Timothy 1:13

The word "form" in the KJV is often translated "pattern". Paul is telling Timothy to hold the pattern of sound words which he heard of Paul. What are these sound words? It would include II Timothy. Confidently we can say that it includes I Timothy. At a minimum, this pattern must include I and II Timothy. It would appear to encompass all of the teaching of scripture, because Paul tells Timothy that he did not shrink from declaring the whole counsel of God. Truth as Paul presented it, in whatever way, is included in these sound words.

What is meant by the word "form" or "pattern" or "standard"? And that is the first word in the Greek - it bears the emphasis. It is hypotyposis. Some call it an "outline," a "sketch," such as an architect makes before drawing the detailed plans for the building. Some regard the New Testament as a sketch, a rough outline of what it should look like, leaving it up to us to fill in the details. Is that correct?

The only other usage of this word is in I Timothy 1:16, in which context he clearly means it as a prototype. It is Exhibit A for the grace of God. It means a "prototype," a "model". Paul's teaching to Timothy is given as a standard. And we are to hold from it, not departing from it. It isn't an outline, where we fill in the details. It is a standard, a prototype, to which we must stick as much as we can. The pattern is clearly not the faith and love, but the teaching, what he has heard from Paul, that has been committed to Timothy. And he is to do it with conviction, and with love and care and concern for others. It doesn't seem to be limited to New Testament truth, this pattern, but it does include the form and function of a New Testament church.

I Timothy 3:14-15

We know that what Paul taught Timothy was a pattern. We know that Paul taught Timothy what is contained in I Timothy prior to writing II Timothy. And here in I Timothy Paul teaches about a necessary way to behave oneself in the house of God. And it is the household of God, not so much a building, but a

collective testimony. It is not "the" church, but "church," in the singular, the word "assembly", "ekklesia." It is a local assembly. And this church is supposed to hold up the truth, and ground the truth.

So in what way are we to behave ourselves? We would have to go through I Timothy. So what is the way he ought to behave himself? The book begins with teachings on doctrine that must be defended, and false teachers that must be silenced. Then in ch1:11-17, he talks about the declaration of the glorious gospel of God. Ch1:20 talks about discipline. So part of the pattern includes a within and a without. Then in ch2, there is a pattern for corporate/collective prayer. We find distinct roles between male and female in this pattern. Holiness is requisite. Interpersonal relationships matter. Clothing matters. It is all an essential behaviour that is part of a pattern. We read about elders and deacons, honour and care for widows, provision for elders who labour in the word and doctrine, no partiality shown, charging the rich not to be highminded, etc. So we have not fully answered the question, but we can safely say that there is a pattern.

Usage of the Word "Ekklesia"

Let's talk about the word "church," "ekklesia." "Ek" means "out of" and "kaleo" means "to call." It means "those that are called out." In New Testament time, the word had taken on its own meaning. It meant "assembly." It was commonly used in Greek society, and the Romans adopted it as well. It was a gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public space in assembly. In Greek culture (which is not how we determine our practice), their concept of an ekklesia was their city/states. A certain number of citizens would be part of the ekklesia, and a call would go out for them to assemble. There was a defined membership, a list of citizens who had the right to be part of the assembly. There were certain qualifications, such as 18+, 2 years of military service, male. You could be disqualified by owing a debt, prostitution, failing to support your family. So you could be disqualified, put out. They had roughly 40 meetings per year, plus extra meetings for emergencies. There was freedom of participation. Nine members of a higher government body were chosen to run the ekklesia. It is not a surprise that as we go through the New Testament, those characteristics that describe an "ekklesia," a church or an assembly, can be often transferred into the New Testament truth.

But how is the word used in the New Testament? This is not ekklesia of Athens, but ekklesia of the living God. So He is the One to whom we look.

Matthew 16:15-19, 18:15-20

We need to understand the context of these two sections in the book of Matthew. Often people say, "That has nothing to do with Matthew's gospel. You are taking this out of context." Matthew's gospel is divided into 5 sections. Since the theme of the gospel is the Lord Jesus as the King. It is not surprising that it is divided by 5 key discourses that He gave. The first is in Matthew 5-7. There the King presents the principles of the government of His kingdom. In Matthew 10, He sends out His 12 messengers with the message of the kingdom that the King is coming. The nation says, "No, we don't want this King. He is coming in the power of Beelzebub." Then in ch12, the King states how the relationship is going to change. Earthly relationships are set aside, and spiritual relationships are set up. And so he delivers the third discourse in Matthew 13. He then talks about how the King is going to be absent – covered in Matthew 16. But despite the King's absence, something new is going to happen – ekklesia. He is going to build His Church. That statement fits perfectly in the context of Matthew, regarding the global Church, which includes everyone who is saved from Pentecost to the Rapture.

The fourth discourse divides the next section, where He is talking not about national issues, but about those who have trusted Him, and how they are going to manage in His absence. He gives statements about relationships, which is the context of Matthew 18. He describes this process of restoration and dealing with sin, and in that context is something called "ekklesia," which involves believers managing in the King's absence, working together and being together. That is the context of the promise of Matthew 18:20. There is a final discourse in Matthew 24-25, where He speaks of the King coming back. These two verses are perfectly in place in Matthew's gospel. The first one speaks of the Church which is His body. But Matthew 18 cannot be speaking about every believer. The Lord Jesus is introducing something that we know so intimately, but at that time it was something prophetic. The Lord Jesus shows us what it is going to be like, what is going to matter in the local church. And these are the same things that are going to be taken up by the Apostle Paul when he gives the pattern.

So what do we find here? Even though every believer is part of the global Church, not every believer is necessarily part of a Matthew 18 ekklesia. How do we know? We are introduced with a conflict, an argument between two believers. There is an opportunity to set that right, but there comes a point when it is told to the ekklesia. Thus it must be something local - not every believer from Pentecost to the Rapture could be informed. And this one who was associated with the ekklesia, if still unrepentant of this offence, is now to be treated as a heathen, with no right to participate. Just as the Greeks could expel one from their ekklesia, so one could be put out of a New Testament church.

Secondly, believers are gathered. It is a passive verb – it is not that they gather, but that they have been gathered. A herald has called these people to assemble. Those that are part of a local assembly have been gathered together by Someone else, the Spirit of God.

Thirdly, the basis for assembly gatherings is the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. That does not mean putting the verse on the wall. "If you ask anything in My name I will do it" is not a formula, and nor is this verse. This means that it is in association with His will, His desire, His purposes. It is about an association. What kind of an association is it? The term "in My name" is used 17 times in His name. It is linked with authority (casting out demons), care (giving a cup of water), His will (asking the Father). Those three define what "in His name" means. So it isn't something that we can claim. It is something we must pursue. We must bow to His authority. We must be marked by His care. Thirdly, our actions must be governed according to His will. No one of these three is more important than the other, or if held is sufficient to claim "gathering to His name."

Fourthly, gathering to His name is associated with the Lord's presence. His presence is multifaceted, but in a special sense His presence is in our midst when we gather to His name.

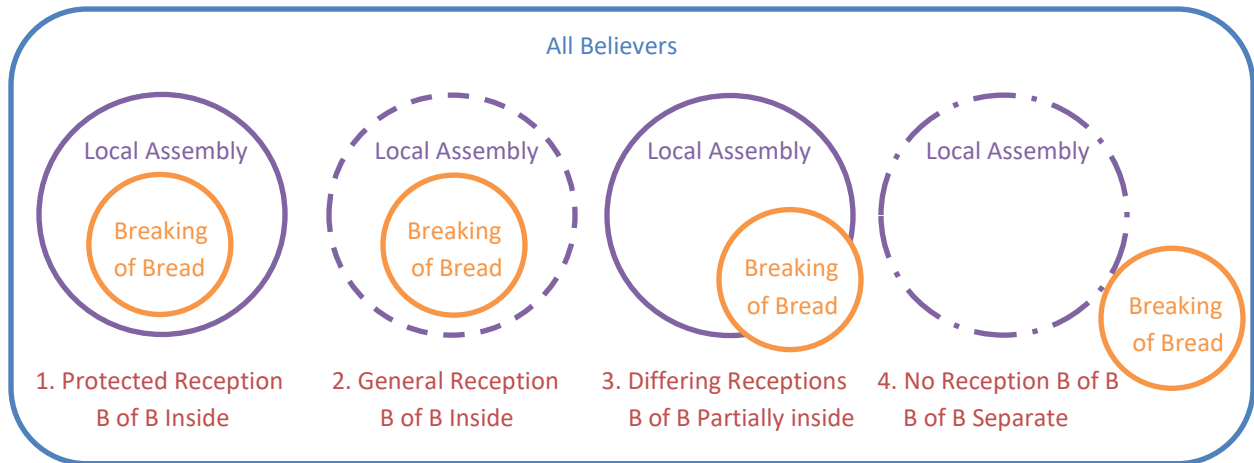
Fifthly, this is only the introduction, but if we had any doubt about whether an ekklesia was a place where God had a specific order, this should clear up the question. Right from its introduction, we find a detailed process about how something should be carried out. The pattern includes detail, as we saw from the writings of Paul, and this does not conflict with the way the Lord Jesus presents the local assembly. It is a place of order.

Sixthly, the assembly involves government on earth that represents heavenly authority - v18. There has to be some way of transferring that authority, and some accountability attached to that, which we will discuss when we consider elders.

Finally, it would be a place of failure. That is a humbling way to introduce the topic, and yet that is how the Lord Jesus chose to introduce the local assembly. So we need to understand the fragility and the failure that does mark a local assembly, and how we react to that. When are we called to jump ship? When does the New Testament expect us to leave? Does it?

ASSEMBLY RECEPTION (AND THE BREAKING OF BREAD)

There seem to be four general views on local church reception among believers I know, differing mainly by what is required for assembly reception and by how the Breaking of Bread is seen in relationship to the local church:



1. Guarded and Inside	2. General and Inside	3. Differing, Partially Inside	4. None, Separate
Reception to the assembly is guarded by the overseers of the assembly	Reception to the assembly is open to all believers not living openly in sin	Reception to the Breaking of Bread is possible without reception to the assembly, and with different standards	Participation in Breaking of Bread is not determined by the assembly
The Breaking of Bread occurs within and for the assembly	The Breaking of Bread occurs within and for the assembly	The Breaking of Bread is hosted by the assembly for the assembly and other believers	The Breaking of Bread exists outside of the assembly for all believers
All participants at the Breaking of Bread have already come under the authority of the shepherds of that local assembly (even if it's for a short time while visiting)	Some participants at the breaking of bread may not be aware that they are under the authority of the local assembly	Some of those participating in the Breaking of Bread submit to the authority of the shepherds, while others are not expected to do so in the same way	The elders of an assembly have no say in what ultimately happens at the Breaking of Bread as they have no authority over participants
The "burden of proof" lies with the person desiring to be received into the fellowship (interview, letter, personal recommendation, etc.)	The default for a visitor (who claims to be a believer) is assembly reception, and the "burden of proof" lies with the assembly leadership, should they wish to deny participation	The default for a visitor (who claims to be a believer) is participation at the Breaking of Bread, and the "burden of proof" lies with the leadership, should they wish to deny participation	The default for all believers is participation at the Breaking of Bread and no other person present has the right to deny

We'll consider every NT passage that mentions the reception of a believer and/or the Breaking of Bread and ask which of the above is consistent with Scripture. The passages are (in the order we'll look at them): Acts 2:41-42, Acts 9:26-30, Acts 15:4, Acts 18:24-28, Romans 16:1-2, Philippians 2:28-30, Acts 20:28-30, Romans 15:7, 1 Corinthians 10:14-21, 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, 1 Corinthians 14:13-25. If I've missed any, please tell me!

Session 2

[see handout above, provided by Shawn St. Clair]

Review

We considered the existence of a pattern, and showed that a pattern does exist for gathering. However, many of our practices are not part of the pattern, such as owning a building or running a Sunday School. The question we must ask in dealing with these issues is whether the practice facilitates fulfilling the pattern, or deters from following it. So that is where we need that wisdom from above that is pure, but also peaceable and so on. That is why we need to be open, not to practice necessarily but to discussion. We would all love to have everyone's questions answered.

The pattern ultimately is about honouring a Person. Our emphasis on the pattern can lead us down a dangerous road where the pattern becomes our God – that is how deceptive our hearts are. It is very easy to establish a pattern as a list of boxes to check, and assume that therefore we are spiritual. They are good, but not the standard of a relationship with God. We know the history of the nation of Israel, and it is written for our learning. Jeremiah 7 - "The temple of the Lord (3x)." God ended by taking it all away.

Assembly Reception

[explanation of the paper]

There are four different views among believers on the relationship between the assembly and the breaking of bread. Not every believer is part of a local church, as we learned from Matthew 18.

Option 1: These people believe that the breaking of bread is something only partaken of by those that are part of the assembly. And so by receiving a visitor, they are receiving the believer into the whole assembly, not just to the breaking of bread. This is protected reception.

Option 2: These people believe that the assembly does receive to break bread, but the only requirement for assembly reception would be salvation, baptism, and profession of an upright life. In this case, the visitor himself decides whether he should be part of it, rather than the elders.

Option 3: This view is that the local assembly has its own requirements for membership, but in some cases the breaking of bread can be celebrated by someone who might not be eligible for assembly fellowship. This idea is that the breaking of bread is hosted by the assembly, but does not hold those who participate to the same standard.

Option 4: Some think that there is no reception, no boundary as far as the breaking of bread, and who are we to deny anyone to break bread?

Which of these four matches up with the New Testament? Can we come to such a conclusion? So we will look at every single New Testament passage that talks about receiving a brother or sister, and every passage that talks about the breaking of bread. Then we will determine which of these four matches with the particular passage. We have seen already from Matthew 18 that there is clearly a within and a without, since one could be put out.

Acts 2:41-42

It would be a mistake to think that everything recorded in Acts is to be practiced today. It would be a mistake to think that Acts is nothing more than a historical book. How do we know which ones to take for ourselves? The only way we can make that determination would be to list every single reference to a local assembly in the book of the Acts, what was told to us about it, and compare it to the epistles to see if it is indeed a practice for us to be followed.

This passage is fundamental, and happens in a unique time. Is the idea of being “added” related to being added to the Church which is His body, or to the local church? It says, “added unto them.” The adding is not to the Church which is His body, but to them as a group of believers in Jerusalem. Notice that salvation and baptism precede the adding, making the idea of it being the global Church wrong in that it comes after baptism.

And these ones who received His word now carry out certain activities, among which is the breaking of bread. Who is participating in the breaking of bread? It was an activity of those who were saved, baptized, and added. Those that were added were not added to the company for the breaking of bread, but added to the company and as such were able to continue in the things that the company was doing. That fits well with option 1, and potentially option 2. The breaking of bread occurs within a local assembly.

Acts 9:26-30

Galatians 1:18 indicates that this is three years after Paul’s conversion. Now he attempts himself to join, glue, fasten to, cleave to the disciples at Jerusalem. It doesn’t mention the breaking of bread. He wanted to join the assembly. However, they were afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple. These were reasons why fellowship was denied. So Barnabas, known by the believers, recommends Paul to them to assure them about Paul. He brought him to the apostles. This refers specifically to Peter and James, those with authority for the church at Jerusalem (Galatians 1). Both Paul’s conversion story and evidence in his life of a genuine conversion are important to the leadership of the assembly, and important for Barnabas to convey.

And so Paul was with them “coming in and going out at Jerusalem.” Based on that meeting, their being assured of Paul’s salvation and testimony, he was received to being among them. So there was a defined group.

But they sent him forth to Tarsus. The wording implies that Paul was now subject to the authority of that local assembly. Coming in and going out with them meant that he was subject to their authority, but even to their authority. This section doesn’t mention breaking of bread, but it does mention being received to the company. This fits option 1 better than option 2, because there are certain requirements for being in a local assembly. The “burden of proof” doesn’t lie with the elders – it lay with Paul and Barnabas, explaining why he met the qualifications for assembly fellowship. Uncertainty, fear is a valid reason for denying assembly fellowship.

Acts 15:4

This word here for “received” means “welcomed,” “admitted.” This also implies a guardian. There was warmth, but a formal requirement. They were received of the apostles and the elders – these were two distinct recognized bodies in the church at Jerusalem. But the whole local church received them, at the guidance of the elders. So if there is anyone in the local assembly that has concerns about someone

being received, that concern should be voiced to the leadership, because the whole assembly is involved in reception.

Participation is framed in the context of having been received – once they were received, they were free to inform them of all that God had done with them. Once again, there is no mention of the breaking of bread. But still this seems to fit best with option 1.

Acts 18:24-28

Here is an active preacher, but his doctrine is not complete. He is fervent in what he is doing. But it doesn't appear that this was associated with a group of believers in Ephesus. It was happening in a synagogue, but he hadn't come to the local assembly gathering. Aquila and Priscilla recognize that this man needed to be taught. They took him unto "them," seemingly only to Priscilla and Aquila at this point. And they found that this man was teachable. It seems that as a result of that, he was received to the local assembly – note in v27 that "the brethren," presumably the local church at Ephesus, wrote to the brethren in Achaia to receive him. So there has been some transition to being part of this group of brethren. Once again, there is no mention of the breaking of bread. But there was teaching, making sure he was prepared for fellowship. Examples in Acts, then, seem strictly to point to option 1, which is beyond a personal declaration of being fit for assembly fellowship.

Romans 16:1-2

The epistles contain doctrine, but also a few examples. Perhaps the epistles could be treated as doctrine and more than as examples, but let's leave them as examples for the avoidance of doubt. To whom is Phebe being commended? It is to all who are in Rome beloved of God and called to be saints, but there may be as many as four specific local assemblies here in ch16. She is a servant of the church at Cenchrea. Paul obviously felt value in mentioning which specific local assembly she was from. And he exhorts them to receive her, to welcome her. She is to be received in the Lord. "In Christ" is linked with salvation; "in the Lord" is linked with Christian testimony. And they are to receive her in a manner worthy of the saints. That could mean a way that every saint is worthy to be received, or in a way that every saint has the power to do. The former is to be rejected, since the whole purpose of this passage shows that not every saint is worthy to be received.

Philippians 2:28-30

They know Epaphroditus here in Philippi. He was from there. Paul is sending him back to them so that they can be assured that he is recovered. The same expression is used – "Receive him in the Lord." They know that he is a believer, but Paul describes for them his service. The saints are to esteem him for his great service, despite their being very familiar with this man. So it is a letter of commendation for a brother already well-known in the assembly.

These two examples both suggest the writing of a letter with a view to reception to the assembly, not to the breaking of bread, based on the believer's service and connection with another local assembly.

There are five New Testament words to do with reception.

1) Acts 2:41 – added. The Lord is the One who adds to a local assembly.

2) Acts 9:26 – joined. The person wants not just to participate, but to associate strongly with this local assembly.

3) Acts 9:28 – coming in. The person has access.

4) Acts 18:27 – received from. This has the idea of coming from one group to another.

5) Romans 16:2 – received. This has the idea of acceptance and appreciation by those who are receiving.

So there are three parties – the Lord, the person being received, and the company receiving.

Acts 20 makes it clear that overseers have the responsibility to ensure that those coming in are not going to pose a threat.

Romans 15:7

This verse has been used as an argument for open reception. But to whom is this verse addressed? “One another,” who is that? Paul uses this expression eight times in the last five chapters of Romans. The first time he uses it is in ch12:3. “I say to everyone among you.” So it is clearly those who are already among this defined group that he is addressing in this letter. If that were taken to be assembly reception, Christ received us in our sin. That is not how we receive to the local assembly.

I Corinthians 10 and 11 are vital passages and will be covered in the next session, and so will be skipped. Neither passage mention reception to the breaking of bread, as they both say “When ye come together,” implying an already existing company.

I Corinthians 14:23

This would only be possible if the Corinthians had a clear understanding of who was in the membership and who was not. There are unbelievers who might also come in, as well as believers who are unlearned, who might be unfamiliar with the practices of this local church. We notice that these ones who come in (v16) say “Amen” at the giving of thanks. Later on, he declares that God is among them. This is a place that this person occupies who observes with the intent to learn, to be able to agree, and to attest to the presence of God.

Do people occupy the room of the unlearned only at the breaking of bread, or at all the meetings of the assembly? It would seem that they occupy this room at all times. However, in I Corinthians 10, the breaking of bread and the cup are expressions of communion that exists in a local assembly. There is a physical, symbolical demonstration of fellowship. The person who occupies this place of being unlearned must also physically be set apart. In other meetings, there is no need to sit apart because no physical demonstration of fellowship is being made, and there is no logistical confusion when it comes to participation.

Session 3

Question: Can you enlighten us on the difference between the Halls and the Chapels, and give us scriptural proof?

The short answer is “No.” We should not define, defend, or denounce groups of believers, especially based on labels that have been assigned to them. There are no such classifications in the New Testament. There are only local churches. There are churches reprimanded by the Lord in Revelation 2-3 because of their practices. But they are still local churches, and faithful believers within them are encouraged to persevere. Some local churches are noted for having their external form correct, and being reprimanded for having left their first love or for becoming self-sufficient. The Ephesians would have been able to check off a lot of these boxes, but they were in danger of the lampstand being removed. Names on buildings are helpful to passersby, but have no mention in the New Testament. Paul speaks in I Corinthians 11 about the “churches of God,” every local church at that time. If we use the term “the assemblies” as Paul uses it in I Corinthians 11 to refer to every local church, then we are being consistent with the usage of scriptures. But we are unqualified to determine where all the lampstands are in Winnipeg, etc. So my responsibility is to examine the scriptures and ask in the Spirit what the New Testament teaches. What I do must be out of faith, so there is nothing wrong with believing that what we do is according to the scriptures. We should recognize failure, but should seek to carry out the teachings of the New Testament. But there should be love and humility shown to all as well. There is more to the question, but this is all we can say scripturally, especially publicly, with only the word of God as our authority.

Acts 2:42

We saw in the previous session that the breaking of bread isn't ever treated in the New Testament as being separate from a local assembly, with different requirements. And even if a visitor is only there for a short time, for that time he/she is completely under the authority of the assembly that has received them. There is no difference between a received visitor and a received member.

But there is much more to assembly fellowship than participation at the breaking of bread. There are blessings, and responsibilities. The word “receive” we saw meant “glue,” “cleave,” “cement.” It is a whole-hearted integration and commitment.

The verse says, “They,” not “some of them,” continued steadfastly. That is the norm, the expectation of a local assembly, commitment to all activities of the assembly. Hebrews 10:25. It means committed attendance, but more – perseverance. It implies hard work, pressing on. The root word is found in Luke 5:10, “partners.” It has the idea of commitment “through thick and thin.” Some new translations use the expression “devoted themselves to.” Is honouring the Lord, building up the Lord's people, the center of my life? Is God's assembly the center of my life? This became their family, their circle in the New Testament. We all fall short of that.

The first two elements, the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, describe the foundation of the assembly. Then the second two, the breaking of bread and prayers, are two of the meetings of a local assembly. So we are going to develop the character of the gatherings of the local assembly. First we will go through Acts and see what attitudes were towards the local assembly. Then we will go through looking for specific meetings.

Attitudes Regarding the Local Assembly

Acts 5:11

At the beginning of every dispensation, God acts decisively. So there was an understanding of God's holiness, and that God expects sin to be judged. That is an attitude that should mark us in the local assembly. This is backed up in the epistles in I Corinthians 5. Personal discipline is also a part of assembly practice – I Corinthians 11. Sadly, even divine discipline may be part of the pattern of local assemblies.

Acts 8:1-3

A local church is persecuted, and they endure persecution. The epistles tell us that they that live godly will endure persecution. The local church in 90% of the world will be persecuted. Believers are expected to carry on despite persecution. Acceptance in the community is not a metric of success.

Acts 8:4A

A local assembly is a place where despite persecution, there is a thirst, an ambition to spread the gospel. Does that mark us? The epistles also support this in multiple places.

Acts 9:31

Here is an interesting balance – there will be times of rest as well, so we should not stir up persecution. They were edified. The word of God was being used as a means of building up God's people. That is the primary means for building up God's people. Is that what we desire? They walked in the fear of the Lord (mentioned already) and the comfort of the Holy Spirit. It was a place of encouragement. Sometimes believers fear coming to the local assembly, when it should be the one place of refuge in their lives.

Acts 13:1

V1 mentions local gift. Local brethren played a major part of the activities of the assembly. They were identifiable gifts. Not all had the same gift. Gift was unbiased – notice the diversity of this group. A local church should be a place where social biases are put to one side, and every gift is recognized. James 2 makes that clear. Gift was Christ-centered. In v2, they ministered to the Lord. There is a distinction between men and women, as only men are mentioned with public gifts here in Antioch.

Acts 13:2

There is a vision for needs beyond the walls of the local assembly. There is a desire to spread the gospel out.

Acts 14:23

There is a plurality of elders.

Acts 15:41, 16:5

“Confirming” and “establishing in the faith” – there is a desire that truth be established and preserved. The assembly is the pillar and ground of the assembly. We should seek to teach and establish all of God's truth.

Acts 20:28

It is a place to be protected by overseers. But it is also a place that is supremely valuable to God. Despite our failings, every single local church has been purchased with His own blood. If I am starting to wonder if it is worth it, maybe I need to remember what it means to God. Then I should ask Him to help me find the value in it that He does.

Meetings of the Local Assembly

How did they meet in Acts, and is there support for these meetings in the epistles?

Acts 2:42

Here are two reasons why they gathered together – breaking of bread and prayers. We will come back to breaking of bread. Why were only these two mentioned? These were the two that required no spiritual gift. They were able to easily begin these two.

I Timothy 2:1

Four words are used. “Supplication” are specific requests for specific needs. Let’s have specific things in mind to pray about. Come burdened to pray about something specific. There is a general sense of “prayer.” There is “intercessions,” speaking to God on behalf of others, such as the unsaved and their great need. “Giving of thanks” should always be part of our prayer meetings, especially if the specific supplications have been answered.

I Timothy 2:8

The word “men” here means “males.” This will be covered in the next session. The males are the ones praying according to the pattern. So prayer meetings are a meeting of the local assembly.

Acts 12:5

The people of God realized that they had a power to overcome that very difficult circumstance. Trials ought to be viewed as a reason for a special prayer meeting to intervene in this problem.

Acts 11:26

They met for teaching – so essential. There is gift for teaching, and it is the responsibility of the overseers to monitor and encourage the teaching. The only thing that has a long term effect on the people of God is the truth of His word.

Acts 15:30

This is a letter, not the New Testament. But there was a gathering to read a letter with apostolic content. We are expected to gather to present God’s word, both in teaching but also from I Corinthians 14:29 as prophets. There is a place for questions to be asked and answered. There is a precedent for a Bible reading, as we don’t have prophets, but we do have the word of God, and questions can be asked and answered. Colossians 1:23 also supports this. Things should be done decently and in order, but it can be of great benefit to go through verse by verse.

Acts 14:27

We don’t have any teaching from the epistles on this subject, but they are gathering for a missionary report. We are taught in I Timothy 2 to pray intelligently, and that would be a reason to give thanks when we hear a report of the Lord’s work. They do certainly do this in the book of the Acts.

Acts 15:6, Acts 20:7

This is a gathering that doesn’t involve everyone in the local assembly – the apostles and the elders. In a future session, we will see that the elders are to shepherd God’s people, and that requires a discussion on difficult situations or on what kind of teaching is required. That isn’t a collective, voting process. No support is found for that in the New Testament pattern. That responsibility is left with the overseers.

Acts 20:20-21

Paul is certainly including the gospel at the end of v21. And therefore there was a public gathering with the believers in Ephesus for the proclamation of the gospel. Gospel work is part of the expectation of a local assembly. The gospel is the lifeline of the assembly. Every assembly that neglects the gospel has suffered as a result.

But the gospel is not seen to be confined to something that happens as a local company. Gospel preaching should be the focal point of outreach work, and it is consistently linked back with an assembly – every missionary journey of Paul’s started from an assembly. But let’s not be satisfied with this as if that is all there is to outreach. Let’s have a vision for the wider need of those who are not willing to come in. There should be a desire to find other ways to come and present the gospel – ideally preach it, but otherwise make contact as well.

Acts 5:11

They gathered for discipline, as we are told to do in I Corinthians 5. Sadly, there are occasions where the assembly needs to gather to carry out discipline according to I Corinthians 5. The objective is ultimately repentance and restoration.

The breaking of bread is unique. It cannot be held outside the circle of the New Testament, as we saw in the previous meeting. It has two names – “the breaking of bread” and “the Lord’s supper.” We are given the greatest amount of detail about it. It is not technically called a “worship meeting,” as we are expected to worship at every meeting. It is the only meeting that we are told when it occurred. In Acts 20:16, they are hurrying to get to Jerusalem. But they waited seven days, because this was only practiced on the first day of the week. That was not flexible.

I Corinthians 10 tells us about the cup and the bread (in that order). The emphasis of that section is that it is an expression of communion, a display of the fact that the real basis for our fellowship is the fact that blood was shed for us and that we are part of the body of Christ. That is not presented as the basis for reception to participate in that – that is what is being declared through those actions for a reminder to us. It is not a list of qualifications in ch10 for participating of the breaking of bread. That is already established for the whole epistle, as being part of a local assembly. In that context, we display those features of being members of His body.

I Corinthians 11 tells us the order to carry it out in – the bread first, and then the cup. And we are told to do it in remembrance of Him. There is supposed to be a single focus – Him. There is also an outward view, proclaiming the Lord’s death, to those who observe. There is an onward view, an upward view – “until He come.” So I am being reminded of my link with my fellow-believers. I am remembering the Lord in the midst. I am declaring to all around the Lord’s death. And I am looking up, and being reminded that He is coming soon.

So every activity of the local assembly is about Him. Let’s not focus on details for details’ sake, but on details for His sake, to honour Him – praying, preaching the gospel, teaching, and the breaking of bread.

Session 4

Question: How exclusive does the assembly need to be, and where can we agree to disagree? It seems that we are so eager/quick to separate ourselves from others.

We have been noticing from the start that there is a pattern that we hold to with conviction, but also in love. If we are indeed quick to separate ourselves from others, then we have a problem. That isn't the objective. The Lord prayed for His disciples for two things. The first was that they might be sanctified in the truth. It mattered to the Lord Jesus that we would fulfill the word of God in our lives. He also prayed for unity. We need to practice what we hold to, recognize that we fail where others are faithful, and not have an eagerness to keep ourselves separate but to be a help to all of our fellow-believers and find a way to enjoy full and happy fellowship. Protection and care is important, but our primary objective should be to reach out and show our care.

Question: Sometimes we seem to respect those who have the gift of teaching and practice it from the pulpit with more respect than those with other spiritual gifts.

That is a problem. The gift of teaching doesn't make anyone more significant than another believer. Paul extols Phebe and her work. We will look at 10 areas where sisters excel over brothers in their service. How do we stop this? Those of us that teach have to watch how they come across. My thoughts do not have authority. The only authority is in the scriptures. A right understanding of scripture would help.

Question: Can submission of women become suppression of women by men in the church?

It could happen, but we need a right understanding of how the scriptures view women.

Question: How can I as a woman encourage healthy growth in the church?

Women in the Family and Body of Christ

Galatians 3:26-28

There is absolute equality amongst all the children of God – v26. There is equality in the body of Christ – v28. There is no racial, social, or gender-related superiority in the body of Christ. It is a sin if these distinctions are treated with superiority in the New Testament assembly. But there is a difference between relationship to God and roles for God. Regardless of role, there is absolute equality in our relationship with God.

If that is as God says, why would God assign different roles to different people in the church? Clearly there are different roles in gift in general, not just between male and female. We have already noted that gift does not indicate superiority. I Peter 4:10. Spiritual gift is not to look important, but for me to put on my towel and kneel down and "wash your feet." Every one of us has a spiritual gift, which should be used for this purpose.

What about the roles of males and females? The Lord Jesus was able to take a place of submission to failing, earthly parents while still submitting to His perfect heavenly Father. And that would have been precious for the Father to behold. And this topic, too, displays something precious to God, a visible display of that kind of submission that reminds us of the Lord Jesus.

I Corinthians 11:1-2

Both sections of this chapter refer to local church practice, as does the previous chapter, as well as ch12-14. That appears to be the context. The second section of the chapter mentions two physical symbols – the bread and the wine. And so in the first section there are two symbols, the uncovered head of the man and the covered head of the woman.

I Corinthians 11:3

Order is everywhere. Without order, societies collapse. Rebellion is the lack of order. Subjection is submission to authority, and is required for order. God has established an order for the local assembly. And subjection to authority does not make the person with authority superior. Satan tries to tell us this. That is a false connection between subjection and superiority. Subjection does not require recognition of superiority or acknowledgement of superiority, nor does it imply superiority at all. The proof is that the Head of Christ is God, whereas God is not in any way superior to Christ. It is simply indicative of an order. God's plan for the local church is the order established here.

I Corinthians 11:4

God also wants this order to be explained and displayed through emblems. The man's head is Christ. The man is not able to pray with Christ covered – we cannot see Him or access Him. But there is a link between his physical head as a symbol of a spiritual Head in God's established order. God desires men to pray or prophesy with their heads uncovered, because by covering his head a man would be failing to display the glory of his Head, which is Christ.

I Corinthians 11:5

In the order, the woman's head is the man. It would be dishonouring to her head to not have her head covered. The physical head of women in a local church when it is covered recognizes that men are not to be on display. Christ is preeminent.

Paul is now going to give four supporting examples. He starts at the end of v5 with the natural covering.

I Corinthians 11:5-6

The implied answer is that it would be a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaven. Women who have lost or remove their hair feel a sense of loss or shame. A woman should feel just as out of place without a head covering as she would without hair. It is consistent with the natural realm.

I Corinthians 11:7

Notice the difference, that the man is the image and glory of God. But it does not say that about the woman. The woman is not the visible representative of the man, and therefore not the image. But the word "glory" is also worth noting, and it includes the idea of honour. There is potentially the thought of honour or glory linked with the thought of headship. Recognizing headship indicates that that person is worthy of honour. The headcovering is saying that responsibility still falls to the man, but the honour is veiled.

It does not make sense that Paul would appeal to creation's order to stick to the cultural practice of Corinth. There is an order established, and the headcovering is a recognition of that divine order. It veils the glory that man might think is his, and Christ is the One who receives the preeminence.

I Corinthians 11:10

What about the angels? Angels have a long history. They remember when one of them refused to bow to God's authority. They saw what happened in the garden of Eden, when the woman stepped outside of the order established by God and the disaster that ensued. Now they see in the local church that voluntarily sisters are carrying out what wasn't at the beginning. Voluntary submission to God's order is a beautiful testimony for the angels.

I Corinthians 11:11-12

There is no superiority. There is still interdependence.

I Corinthians 11:13-15

There is an exam question – is it comely for a woman to pray unto God uncovered? The answer is no! And to back it up again, Paul returns to his first argument. And there is a different word for covering used here, that means “cover round about,” instead of “cover upon.” For a man to have long hair, there is no glory in that. But we all recognize it as a glory for a woman to have long hair. And what happens in nature is to be found in another way in the local church.

I Corinthians 11:16

This could be arguing that being contentious is not something we do in the churches of God, which would be pretty condemning. More likely, Paul is saying that every church practices the headcovering. The Corinthians did as well, but Paul is just explaining why. And so it was practiced through early church history.

I Corinthians 11:5, 14:33-34

Just as all the churches practiced the headcovering, so all the churches practiced the silence of women. So whatever praying and prophesying means in ch11:5, it cannot mean that Paul is saying that women should have a public role in assembly meetings. So what could he mean? It could mean that Paul is dealing with the issue of headcoverings first, and then silence next as two separate issues. That might sound strange, but Paul may have been quoting the words of the Corinthians from the questions that they had submitted to him, the things they had written to him about. The question might have said, “Why do women wear headcoverings when praying or prophesying and men don't?”

Another explanation is that women were in fact praying and prophesying in the church. Agabus had four daughters that were prophetesses. Corinth had a lot of prophets active in their midst. So they may have encouraged women with the gift of prophecy to come in and speak to the gathering. Paul also frames this in the negative sense, not in the positive. However, silence is expected, as in ch14 and I Timothy 2.

It might also mean that it applies when women pray or prophesy or teach outside of the assembly meetings, as well as clearly within the assembly. Apart from the fact that it doesn't fit with the context, in I Thessalonians 5 we are commanded to pray without ceasing. That would mean that men would never be able to wear a headcovering, and women would always have to have one. It could be only formal acts of praying.

Regardless, it is clear that in the assembly, there is no question that a woman should cover her head in the assembly gathering. It is a beautiful display of subjection.

I Corinthians 14:33-35

There is the beauty of subjection, the beauty of service, but here the beauty of silence. V35 might tend to make us bristle, as we go back to thinking about superiority. But if there is rebellion against the pattern of God's order, then it is a shame. Why would the Lord want to have that as part of the pattern? The Lord Jesus was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb so He opened not His mouth. There was a subjection to the Father's will, and then a silence before His accusers that we might never appreciate how precious it was to God. Silence is just as precious as words.

I Timothy 2:8

Men are expected to have moral uprightness, controlled tempers, confidence in faith. These are part of the pattern, and should mark us in our service. Those three things are also displaying Christ. Everything about the local assembly is ultimately displaying Christ. These are also expected of sisters, but brothers tend to struggle with them more than sisters do.

I Timothy 2:9

The emphasis of the sister's service should be on spiritual beauty and character rather than superficiality and show. Obviously this is expected of brothers as well, but is highlighted for sisters. This is also seen in Christ. So there are instructions about clothing in the New Testament about clothing, and the requirement is well-arranged, seemly, modest. So it does not include extravagant displays of wealth. Any display of self through clothing is a contradiction of the reason why we gather – to display Christ.

I Timothy 2:10

The emphasis is not on external, but on the internal, and its manifestation through good works. And that is also a display of Christ. There are many female characteristics that are seen in Christ, who was the perfect balance of every virtue – He is illustrated in the sheep, the hen, the doe.

I Timothy 2:11-14

Her silence is not a punishment. But it is an opportunity to excel where Eve failed, in displaying the order that God created. God the Father doesn't think anything less of the silent subjection seen in His Son than He does of the public voice speaking with power and authority.

Where Sisters Excel

How can a woman help and encourage healthy growth in the church?

Anna in Luke 2:36-38 excelled in **prayer**. She was in touch with God. She was the Hannah of the New Testament. Prayer is the secret, the impetus behind the blessing brethren see in preaching.

Anna also excels in **praise**. All through the New Testament, we find women spontaneously responding in praise. We see that with Mary and with Elizabeth. Only the Lord knows how many Sunday mornings He has received far greater praise and delight from sisters silently than what He received from public worship. Many sisters have made great contributions to the hymnbook as well, in praise.

Anna spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem – she bore **testimony**. Women have an opportunity to reach out to those that men would struggle to reach or even could not reach. Paul recognized the value of women that labored with him in the gospel.

Luke 8:2 shows how women excelled in **giving**, ministering to the Lord of their substance. The widow also gave her two mites. Women seem to excel in generosity. Husbands, allow your wives to exercise their generosity. It is something that they excel at.

Acts 16:40 shows a woman excelling in **hospitality**. Martha also showed hospitality to the Lord Jesus. Priscilla and the mother of Rufus also showed hospitality to Paul. Sisters excel at this.

In Romans 16:1-2, Phebe excelled in **succouring**. She was a succourer of many, and of Paul also. When others were sick or discouraged, she went to strengthen them. This was what made her worthy to be received in the Lord. Women in the New Testament are found building up and strengthening.

In Acts 18:26, women excel in **study** and in support, as Priscilla works with Aquila in instructing Apollos. While women are prohibited publicly from teaching, outside of that sphere. Sisters are known for studying the scriptures. Priscilla was just as able as Aquila, and John discussed great doctrines with the elect lady in II John.

II Timothy 1:5 shows how women excel in working with the **family**. For the first seven, you don't need a husband, or children. But here a mother can be the greatest influence in her child's life. As a mother or a grandmother, show your children the love and the fear of the Lord.

Titus 2:3-5 talks about women **teaching** younger sisters. There are younger sisters who would love to have that support. We need to open up about our failures with one another as well. Then young people think they are the first to have failed or to have gone through that trial. Satan would love us to think that.

II Timothy 3:12 talks about **suffering**. More sisters are found at the cross, at the tomb, and through history more sisters are found in places where men have fled because of suffering. And as well you can be a help to others who are suffering.

Session 5

Question: Do we have any scripture about the buildings where we meet?

No. We are told that believers met in homes, or in open areas when homes were too small. Buildings, like many other things, can help us to carry out what we have called the pattern, the mandate of a local church. Do we have any guidance about the buildings themselves? A local assembly is called a “lampstand.” If that is part of our responsibility, to shine light, to uphold truth, then the character of our buildings and the use of our buildings would enhance us carrying out the pattern. In Cornwall, we looked for a glass front, so there was no uncertainty about coming in. It was in a public area with lots of people passing by, and we try to bring people in. The building facilitates meeting people.

Question: Do women being silent in the churches refer to assembly meetings?

Yes. Unquestionably the context of ch14 is in relation to the meetings of the local assembly. It is not the building. So a Sunday School and other activities may not be assembly meetings, and women can certainly speak in such cases.

Question: What is the responsibility of the man in relation to the family, and in relation to the local assembly?

This gets at the link between family life and the local assembly. Jeremiah 7:17-18. This is one of the saddest verses in the Bible, as the decision of parents impact their children. Ezra 2 tells the other story, as parents led their children back into the worship of God. We must emphasize the importance of the home. There is no distinction between assembly life and home life. Decisions we make are going to impact our children invariably – decisions about attendance, how we talk about other believers, what we allow into our home. There has to be a consistency between what we do at the assembly meetings and the rest of family life, or else we are letting our children know that hypocrisy is okay. Fathers especially should take responsibility for establishing a family habit of reading, praying, and singing together. God knew He could trust Abraham to lead Isaac in the ways of the Lord. And so when they went up the mountain, Isaac knew what the procedure was for worship. He knew what was missing. He knew when something was out of place, because Abraham had taught him well in the home. Joshua said, “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” Joshua as a father was willing to stand apart from other families in this respect. Job sanctified his children, and offered offerings on their behalf continually. These are adult children, but they come when he summons them. But this had been his practice – he did it continually. Asaph – Psalm 78. Come to the New Testament. Ephesians 6:4. Never say, “My wife takes care of that.” Scripture lays this responsibility at the feet of fathers.

This is all inseparably linked to the assembly. In I Timothy 3, someone who doesn’t know how to rule their own house well is disqualified from being an elder. Healthy assembly lives take root in healthy home spiritual practices. I Peter 3:7. So prayer and discussion of spiritual things is an expected part of the marriage relationship. If that is what is most important to both of you, then it should be at least sometimes the topic of conversation. And so spiritual health in the assembly starts in the home and in marriage. So maybe assembly problems are symptoms of problems in our families and our marriages.

Question: What do the scriptures refer to when they speak of deacons?

In Philippians 1:1, we see that there was a distinct group recognized as deacons. I Timothy 3 lists the qualifications of the deacon, which are almost equivalent to the qualifications for an elder. Acts 6 is an example from the book of Acts a recognition of certain men who were going to support in a certain role. Deacon work requires the confidence of God's people and the elders. It will free the shepherds/elders to be able to focus on shepherding, with other responsibilities handed to the deacons. One such possible sphere would be finance. The oversight does not need to be involved in these responsibilities, because the deacons themselves have the trust and spiritual qualifications. One other example is the Sunday School superintendent.

Shepherds and Sheep

Acts 20:17

To be clear, we see multiple elders from one church. There are at least four distinct words. The word "elder" implies spiritual maturity. The word "overseer," sometimes translated "bishop," has the thought of responsibility. The word "pastor" is used, or "shepherd." That indicates care, but also this is how the spiritual gift is spoken of. These are all the same group of people.

So what are their responsibilities? What are their qualifications? What is this gift? The point is not to judge men whom God has already raised up, but to judge those who would be raised up. There is a need for shepherds to be raised up to care for God's people, stemming from a genuine love for the Lord and an exercise laid upon them by Spirit. And every believer can be involved in shepherding.

Qualifications

The word "elder" requires maturity, which requires time – time in God's word, time in prayer, and time among God's people.

I Timothy 3:1-7

Moral soundness is another requirement. It is a good work, an honourable work. It doesn't matter what other people think. You are rarely thanked. You are almost always criticized. But this is an honourable work. And it isn't an office – it is a work. It is a work worth aspiring to. And as we go through the list of requirements, this should become part of how you prepare yourself.

It says "blameless," not sinless, but there is no obstacle to trust. There is integrity. Nothing is justly held against him. He has a good reputation. Don't make it an impossible standard. Keep yourself free of justified accusations.

He must be morally upright – the husband of one wife. Don't disqualify yourself by moral impurity. The man is not frivolous, but discrete, vigilant. The man must be sober, not given to extremes. The man must be of good behaviour, orderly. He must be hospitable, with an open home to saved and unsaved. He must be apt to teach, able to handle God's word. That requires preparation. There is a warning against wine. He is not abusive, not violent, not harsh. He doesn't lash out. He is not greedy of filthy lucre – he is honest, above board. He is patient, trying to bring peace. He is not a brawler, not the type to want to be in an argument. He is not covetous – he doesn't live for material things. He rules his own home well, as we have discussed in detail. He is not to be a novice – he must be mature. Otherwise there is a danger of pride. He has reached the point where he has realized his own weakness and dependence on the Lord. Satan is going to make overseers a target. If he can get them down, he can wreak havoc. He must have a

good testimony, not only within the assembly, but by those outside the assembly, them that are without.

Acts 20:28

An overseer is something that the Spirit of God identifies, calls to. It isn't based on a democratic election. Without this, there will be big difficulties.

Responsibilities

Acts 20:28

They are overseeing together. They must work together. Just coming to consensus among the overseers is at times a difficult thing. Each decision may not necessarily be exactly how one of the overseers would have done it. So don't dissect which elder decided what.

They are to take heed first unto themselves, and therefore to one another. So an oversight has more than one overseer so that if one overseer falls into discouragement or failure, there is still accountability and support.

But they are responsible to the flock as well, to all the flock, which makes it a large task indeed. That again explains why there is a defined membership – the shepherds need to know who to shepherd.

They are to feed the flock of God. This is an extremely large responsibility, to ensure that every believer is being fed with the word of God. And one thing may not feed all sheep. That's why we need so many shepherds.

Acts 20:29-30

There is the thought of protecting, or guarding the flock. Here is again a reason why there needs to be guarded access to influence within the local assembly. Grievous wolves enter in. Some will make it in. How do you identify a wolf? Wolves don't care about the flock. They destroy sheep. They draw away disciples after themselves. They speak perverse things – adding things to the scripture, or taking away from what God says.

Acts 20:31

If we can warn without weeping, probably the main concern is my image. If the genuine concern is the sheep, there will be weeping with the warning. It won't be harsh. It will be out of care for the sheep. Shepherds weep day and night for years.

I Peter 5:1-4

The word "overseer" means to watch over, but also to visit among. So an overseer isn't one standing on the side. This isn't driving cattle. You lead sheep by being among them. How else will the shepherds know of the needs of the sheep? They are examples to the flock, not lords over God's heritage. They don't bark down commands. Their life is the example. They do it for the Chief Shepherd.

The Gift of Pastorship

Ephesians 4:11

Pastors and teachers are two gifts linked together. As with all gifts, there is therefore stewardship. It is something entrusted, something for which we are entrusted. Timothy was instructed to neglect not the gift. And God has equipped you to do the responsibility. But He gives this as a stewardship. You are

accountable to use it and develop it and learn as much as you can from scripture. Get help from others so that you can use this gift to its maximum effectiveness for God. I Peter 5 reminds us of the reward in exchange for stewardship in the case of faithful execution. Faithfulness is not necessarily results.

So aspire to be a shepherd, but don't think you have to be a shepherd to do the work of a shepherd. We should all be working as shepherds.

Responsibilities of Sheep

Hebrews 13:7

We have responsibility as sheep just as much as the shepherds have. How do you remember them? We can remember them in prayer daily. They have spoken to us the word of God. Their responsibility is to teach. My responsibility is to hear and to submit to their teaching. Their responsibility was to be an example. Our responsibility to follow that example. As should have been noted previously, there are always limits to submission. So it is here – we must consider the end of their conversation. If it doesn't match up with God's word, don't focus on those. Follow the parts that are after God.

Hebrews 13:17

This is very clear, of course within the limits just mentioned. Shepherds will one day give account for what they are doing. But we are accountable to be submissive, even in difficult situations. And their giving account is mentioned even in this verse. If I am always causing problems for the overseers, trouble and anxiety, perhaps they will have to account to the Lord that they tried their best and things were just too difficult. If they can't report back with joy, and instead give account with grief, you will be held accountable for how you caused difficulty to the shepherds.

Hebrews 13:24

Communicate with the shepherds. Talk to them. Greet them. There are responsibilities on both sides.

For the shepherds, see Paul's final words to the elders of the assembly at Ephesus.

Acts 20:32

For the assembly, see Paul's closing words in I Thessalonians.

I Thessalonians 5:11-15